

## ***The Daily Record***

### **MD Volunteer Lawyers Services broadens vision**

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While the overall mission of the Maryland Volunteer Lawyer Service remains the same, recently the nonprofit clearinghouse for pro bono attorneys has broadened its approach to serving low-income Marylanders with civil legal problems.

And that provides new opportunities for private lawyers.

Now MVLS is targeting service groups that give support to the clients -- and at the same time is broadening the scope of legal work available to volunteer private attorneys.

Founded in 1981, the organization served a record 4,471 people last year with the help of nearly 2,400 volunteer lawyers. MVLS is Maryland's oldest organized pro bono program with volunteer attorneys and client services across the state -- and has served as a model program for pro bono services in the U.S. since its founding in 1981.

"The American Bar Association made grants in 1981 to MVLS and four other pro bono programs to help promote private attorney involvement in civil legal aid to the poor," explained W. Reece Smith Jr., who was ABA president in 1981.

Smith, who practices in Tampa, Fla., led the ABA's efforts to preserve federal funding for legal aid and increase local cooperation between the organized bar and legal aid.

"These model programs laid the foundation for the outstanding expansion in pro bono that we have experienced in the United States -- from 50 organized pro bono programs in the early '80s to over a thousand today," Smith added. "Beginning with MVLS and through your recent rules on pro bono reporting and planning, Maryland has stayed in the forefront of pro bono development in our country."

#### **Law has its limits**

Why the recent shift by the MVLS toward helping service groups? That's easy -- not all the problems faced by low-income people are legal.

"Fixing a legal problem doesn't solve the problem of poverty," explained Winifred C. Borden, MVLS's executive director since 1991. "And we aren't equipped to do that."

To address broader poverty issues, MVLS has reached out to organizations such as the Mid-Shore Council on Family Violence, the Somerset County Department of Social Services, and CASA, a domestic violence program in Hagerstown.

"We'd send a lawyer out to talk to clients and the staff," Borden said. "Those programs

showed us we can be more effective in terms of client service when we partner."

From there, MVLS moved on to work with community service groups.

"We created our own community development project that provides nonprofits with lawyers to help them with their legal needs," Borden said. "We have clients all over the state and offer a range of services."

Some examples: MVLS provided legal assistance to a group in Allegany County developing a business "incubator" and reviewed personnel policies for a number of organizations.

MVLS also brokered a deal that helped an organization that works to improve access to health care for thousands of low-income and elderly Maryland residents.

"We worked with MEDBANK of Maryland to set up a mail-order pharmacy for uninsured individuals without prescription coverage," Borden said. "Ober, Kaler, Grimes & Shriver donated \$30,000 in legal work setting it up."

Sanford Teplitzky, chair of Ober Kaler's health law department, said he was "very pleased" to work on the project: "It merged our law firm's commitment for serving those in need with our specific expertise in the health law area."

### **CASH and clinics**

On the financial front, MVLS is now a leading partner in a coalition of Baltimore community groups that promote the earned income tax credit, provide home ownership counseling, banking services and financial literacy training. It's called CASH (Campaign for Assets, Savings and Hope), a program created by Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley.

At the same time, MVLS provides assistance to 10 organizations that give free income-tax help. "We trained 180 volunteers and developed procedures for them," Borden said. "The program has given us exposure to groups we haven't had contact with and they're spreading the word."

George Kelly, a Baltimore media consultant, has been an MVLS tax-clinic client for years.

"By using MVLS, I know I'll have someone go with me to the IRS if I get audited," Kelly said. "It gives me a sense of well being. I tell everyone I know. All you have to do is fill out one form. If you're eligible, you're in."

With a grant from the Baltimore Community Foundation's Women's Giving Circle, MVLS is giving financial literacy workshops at the Department of Social Services.

"It's direct client work," Borden said. "The lawyers talk about consumer scams, taxes,

bankruptcy and the bankers talk about credit, credit repair and budgeting -- a nice combo. So it's preventive legal work within a social service context and another example of holistic service and preventive law."

### **What's it all add up to?**

"We're offering a broader view of pro bono services," Borden said. "It also provides an array of opportunities to lawyers to do pro bono work."

Calling all family practioners

Make no mistake: "Traditional" services still make up 70 to 80 percent of what MVLS provides, with about 45 percent of cases falling in the family law category.

And the need for pro bono attorneys to handle them continues.

"We don't have enough lawyers doing family work -- and a lot of lawyers in Baltimore City who do this work aren't stepping up to volunteer," Borden noted. "It's a great need and it's a constant struggle to balance client need with a lawyer's interest. It's like two grocery carts going down the same aisle, but not at the same pace."

Surprisingly, new Rule 6.1 (which states a goal of 50 hours of pro bono service a year and mandates that Maryland lawyers report their pro bono hours) so far hasn't set MVLS' phones ringing off the hook, Borden reported.

"We haven't been flooded with volunteers," she said. "I hope to see a greater interest in the work MVLS does. In community development, we have way too many volunteers. I'd love to convert some corporate lawyers to do family law work."

Carolyn D. Ciraolo, an MVLS volunteer lawyer and chair of the pro bono committee of the Maryland State Bar Association tax section, said private attorneys -- and especially new lawyers building their practices -- who don't volunteer are missing something.

"It's just a wonderful program," Ciraolo said. "A lot of people come out of law school, can't find a job and hang out a shingle. MVLS is such an opportunity for them. They provide training and the people are fantastic."

In addition to free training and experience, newly minted lawyers also get the satisfaction of helping people in need.

"The clients are such a grateful group," Ciraolo said. "Private attorneys often say they're not appreciated when they pull off a miracle. But pro bono clients really appreciate it. I'm changing lives. Plus, you get hugs from your clients!"